

Visa Policy

Q. Mr. President, dropping of visa regime is probably the most important thing for Slovak citizens that would like to come to America and get to know your country. And I'm sure that all of them are very interested if you could tell us approximate date, when do you believe that these visas could be dropped? Thank you.

President Bush. Well, I appreciate you asking that. I can't give you a date. I wish—you know, if I could, I would. What I can tell you is that, one, the issue had been effectively put on the table by the Prime Minister and the Government; secondly, that we do have the way forward, a way to—look, the visa policy was basically set based upon decisions made prior to 1989. And so our policy still reflects overstays as a result of people who left when the people of this part of the world were not free. And we need to adjust that. We need to address those overstays in the light of people escaping a totalitarian regime. And we're in the process of doing that not just for Slovakia but for other countries in Eastern Europe. And we want to do this as quickly as possible.

Secondly, something else has changed, and that is the Slovak Republic has joined the European Union. And there is a new history now that that has been done, and that history needs to be included in the process. And so we're working our way through a new set of analyses that we can take to our Congress and say here's how people are—people from the Slovak Republic have behaved since free. And that's very important; that's very important.

It's—I can't predict how fast bureaucracies move. They tend not to move quickly. But the promise is, is that not only the President but the Secretary of State will do all we can to move this forward as quickly as possible, to be able to answer the question you asked, which is a legitimate question. I'm going to speak to this issue, by the way, in the square in a couple of minutes here, because I want people to hear that I am concerned about making sure our visa policy works.

Prime Minister Dzurinda. I'm very happy because Mr. President has confirmed that this problem is a part of his personal

agenda, so I'm very, very happy because of it.

President Bush. It is.

Prime Minister Dzurinda. We will continue on this tour. Thank you very much.

President Bush. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:15 a.m. in the Office of the Prime Minister. In his remarks, he referred to Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany; Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; and President Jacques Chirac of France. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks in Bratislava

February 24, 2005

Thank you all. *Dobr den.* Mr. President, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your strong leadership and friendship. Mr. Mayor, distinguished guests, citizens of a free Slovakia, thank you for your hospitality. Laura and I are honored, extremely honored, to visit your great country. We bring greetings, and we bring the good wishes of the American people.

With us here today is a group of remarkable men and women from across Central and Eastern Europe who have fought freedom's fight in their homelands and have earned the respect of the world. We welcome you. We thank you for your example, for your courage, and for your sacrifice.

I'm proud to stand in this great square, which has seen momentous events in the history of Slovakia and the history of freedom. Almost 17 years ago, thousands of Slovaks gathered peacefully in front of this theater. They came not to welcome a visiting President but to light candles, to sing hymns, to pray for an end to tyranny and the restoration of religious liberty.

From the hotel to our left, Communist authorities watched thousands of candles shining in the darkness and gave the order to extinguish them. The authorities succeeded in crushing that protest. But with their candles and prayers, the people of Bratislava lit a fire for freedom that day, a fire that quickly spread across the land. And within 20 months, the regime that drove Slovaks from this square would itself be driven from

power. By claiming your own freedom, you inspired a revolution that liberated your nation and helped to transform a continent.

Since those days of peaceful protest, the Slovak people have made historic progress. You regained your sovereignty and independence. You built a successful democracy. You established a free economy. And last year, the former member of the Warsaw Pact became a member of NATO and took its rightful place in the European Union. Every Slovak can be proud of these achievements. And the American people are proud to call you allies and friends and brothers in the cause of freedom.

I know that liberty—the road to liberty and prosperity has not always been straight or easy. But Americans respect your patience, your courage, and your determination to secure a better future for your children. As you work to build a free and democratic Slovakia in the heart of Europe, America stands with you.

Slovaks know the horror of tyranny, so you're working to bring hope of freedom to people who have not known it. You've sent peacekeepers to Kosovo and election observers to Kiev. You've brought Iraqis to Bratislava to see firsthand how a nation moves from dictatorship to democracy. Your example is inspiring newly-liberated people. You're showing that a small nation, built on a big idea, can spread liberty throughout the world.

At this moment, Slovak soldiers are serving courageously alongside U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some have given their lives in freedom's cause. We honor their memory. We lift them up in our prayers. Words can only go so far in capturing the grief of their families and their countrymen. But by their sacrifice, they have helped purchase a future of freedom for millions. Many of you can still recall the exhilaration of voting for the first time after decades of tyranny. And as you watched jubilant Iraqis dancing in the streets last month, holding up ink-stained fingers, you remembered Velvet Days. For the Iraqi people, this is their 1989, and they will always remember who stood with them in their quest for freedom.

In recent times, we have witnessed landmark events in the history of liberty, a Rose Revolution in Georgia, an Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and now a Purple Revolution in Iraq. With their votes cast and counted, the Iraqi people now begin a great and historic journey. They will form a new Government, draft a democratic constitution, and govern themselves as free people. They're putting the days of tyranny and terror behind them and building a free and peaceful society in the heart of the Middle East, and the world's free nations will support them in their struggle.

The terrorist insurgents know what's at stake. They know they have no future in a free Iraq, so they're trying desperately to undermine Iraq's progress and throw the country in chaos. They want to return to the day when Iraqis were governed by secret police and informers and fear. They will not succeed. The Iraqi people will not permit a minority of assassins to determine the destiny of their nation. We will fight to defend this freedom, and we will prevail.

Victory in this struggle will not come easily or quickly, but we have reason to hope. Iraqis have demonstrated their courage and their determination to live in freedom, and that has inspired the world. It is the same determination we saw in Kiev's Independent Square, in Tbilisi's Freedom Square, and in this square almost 17 years ago.

We must be equally determined and also patient. The advance of freedom is the concentrated work of generations. It took almost a decade after the Velvet Revolution for democracy to fully take root in this country. And the democratic revolutions that swept this region over 15 years ago are now reaching Georgia and Ukraine. In 10 days, Moldova has the opportunity to place its democratic credentials beyond doubt as its people head to the polls. And inevitably, the people of Belarus will someday proudly belong to the country of democracies. Eventually, the call of liberty comes to every mind and every soul. And one day, freedom's promise will reach every people and every nation.

Slovakia has taken great risks for freedom in Afghanistan and Iraq. You have proved yourself a trusted friend and a reliable ally.

That is why I recently announced a new Solidarity Initiative for nations like Slovakia that are standing with America in the war on terror. We will help you to improve your military forces so we can strengthen our ability to work together in the cause of freedom. We're working with your Government to make it easier for Slovaks to travel to the United States of America. Hundreds of thousands of our citizens can trace their roots back to this country. Slovak immigrants helped build America and shape its character. We want to deepen the ties of friendship between our people, ties based on common values, a love of freedom, and shared belief in the dignity and matchless value of every human being.

The Velvet Generation that fought for these values is growing older. Many of the young students and workers who led freedom's struggle here now struggle to support families and their children. For some, the days of protest and revolution are a distant memory. Today, a new generation that never experienced oppression is coming of age. It is important to pass on to them the lessons of that period. They must learn that freedom is precious and cannot be taken for granted; that evil is real and must be confronted; that lasting prosperity requires freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom of association; and that to secure liberty at home, it must be defended abroad.

By your efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and across the world, you are teaching young Slovaks these important lessons. And you're teaching the world an important lesson as well, that the seeds of freedom do not sprout only where they are sown; carried by mighty winds, they cross borders and oceans and continents and take root in distant lands.

I've come here to thank you for your contributions to freedom's cause and to tell you that the American people appreciate your courage and value your friendship. On behalf of all Americans, *dakujem*, and may God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:17 p.m. in Hviezdoslavovo Square. In his remarks, he referred to President Ivan Gasparovic and Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda of Slovakia; Chairman Pavol Hrusovsky of the Slovak Parliament; and Mayor Andrej Durkovsky of Bratislava.

The President's News Conference With President Vladimir Putin of Russia in Bratislava

February 24, 2005

President Bush. Thank you all. I've just had a very important and constructive dialog with my friend. It's great to see—I know Laura was pleased to see Lyudmila Putin as well. We have had, over the past 4 years, very constructive relations, and that's the way I'm going to keep it for the next 4 years as well.

We've had an open and candid exchange of views and positions. In our meeting earlier, I said, "Vladimir, when we get in here, I think people are going to be very interested in this press conference for some reason; I'm not sure why." Perhaps it's because you're a leader of a great nation, and I'm fortunate enough to be one too. But you can see we've drawn quite a crowd here. So I'm looking forward to answering their questions.

We produced a lot of positive results at this meeting. We agreed to accelerate our work to protect nuclear weapons and material, both in our two nations and around the world, and I want to thank you for that. And I want to thank our Defense Ministers for working on that issue as well. Minister Ivanov is here. He and Secretary Rumsfeld have had a very constructive relationship. Our mil-to-mil exchanges are very positive, and I appreciate that. You and I talked about that a couple of years ago. I think they're coming to fruition, which is a very important way to make sure we understand each other better.

We agreed upon new efforts to fight the war on terror, to combat MANPADS and improvised explosive devices, and I want to thank you for that. Vladimir has been a—ever since the—September the 11th, he has clearly understood the stakes that we face. And every time we meet, he is—we have an interesting and constructive strategy session about how to continue to protect our peoples from attack. He is—he has confronted some serious attacks in his country. I know what that means as a fellow leader. I know the strain; I know the agony; I know the sadness; I know the emotion that comes with seeing innocent people lose their lives, and we have